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Using  
Resources

# An Interview With FNS Administrator Anna Kondratas

**U**.S. Department of Agriculture food assistance programs help millions of low-income Americans every year. While these programs go a long way toward achieving their specific, nutrition-related objectives, they are part of a larger welfare system that has become complex, overlapping, and confusing, and may well be contributing to the establishment of a permanent "underclass."

Currently, the Administration and both Houses of Congress are trying to determine what reforms are needed to help low-income families out of poverty and into productive employment, while providing necessary nutritional and financial support.

In the following interview, Anna Kondratas, the new administrator of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), discusses welfare and food assistance issues. She also talks about her background and the priorities she has set for the agency.

Kondratas came to FNS in September 1986 to supervise research and policy analysis on legislative, budgetary, and management issues relating to the food assistance programs. She became acting administrator in March 1987 and administrator in June. Kondratas has a long history of interest in welfare policy and other social issues. Before coming to USDA, she was a senior researcher on health and welfare policy issues at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

She has also held positions as economist and teacher. She has published many articles on poverty, welfare, and entitlement reform and has been a frequent public speaker on these issues. *Out of the Poverty Trap*, a book she co-authored, was published in October.

Since becoming FNS administrator,

Kondratas has traveled to many areas of the country and met with the officials who run the food assistance programs at the state and local levels.

**Q.** Ms. Kondratas, you have extensive experience in research and analysis of social programs. Can you tell us how this experience led you to the Food and Nutrition Service?

**A.** Before I came to FNS, I had been doing research on our welfare system for a book on welfare reform. My co-author and I were particularly interested in the genesis and development of the Great Society programs.

We wanted to understand why the poverty rate started stagnating just as these programs were rapidly expanding. We concluded that while the Great Society had laudable goals, it produced a system that could never reduce poverty appreciably and was difficult to change.

I remain confident in that analysis of the problems that confront us. I'm also confident that the most beneficial solutions will develop from a rational, common-sense approach to those problems.

Of course, ideas need testing and tempering in the real world. I saw the offer to join the Food and Nutrition Service as an opportunity to serve and to learn. Experience with assistance programs is invaluable as we seek a practical path toward welfare reform.

**Q.** How has your experience and also, perhaps, your background, helped shape your philosophy for social policy?

**A.** My background as an immigrant certainly has had an influence on my thinking. My parents, both of whom worked in factories for many years, instilled in their children a healthy appreciation for the political freedom and opportunity in this country. I grew up with a faith in democratic capitalism and the uniqueness of America.

From my early Catholic education I gained a social conscience, as well as an understanding of the role of strong values in personal success. My subsequent education, in addition to my teaching and other work experience, contributed substantially to the world view I hold today.

I believe our society should be committed to social justice, political freedom, and opportunity for all. But I reject the idea that income redistribution for its own sake is justice, or that centralized statist welfare programs are a solution. I also believe that it is not only possible, but critical, to formulate compassionate policies that are based on dispassionate analysis. Misplaced emotionalism is the enemy of true compassion.

**Q.** Critics have argued that this Administration has concentrated on carrying out a budget policy at the expense of social policy. How would you respond?

**A.** First let me say that I endorse the Administration's economic and budget policy goals wholeheartedly. Now let me add that budget policy should not drive—or substitute for—sound economic and social policy.

Cutting federal spending is clearly an urgent priority. Any Administration—conservative or liberal—would be fac-



ing the same climate of severe budgetary restraint. But where, and how, and why we cut is also important.

I do feel strongly that we in the Administration must redouble our efforts to explain our social policy goals to the American public. We must convey our firm belief that an unbridled welfare state destroys opportunities for the poor and entrenches them in poverty.

To erase the perception that our social policy has suffered because of our budget policy, we must clarify our policy goals and provide convincing alternatives to the system we now have. And we must do this despite our understanding that even the most rational policy proposals are subject to compromise in the congressional budget process.

**Q.** In light of your experience and philosophy, how would you assess the effectiveness of USDA's food assistance programs?

**A.** The food assistance programs go a long way toward alleviating the symptoms of poverty. There is no doubt that they provide a nutritional safety net for low-income people. There should also be no doubt about the continuing federal commitment to providing food assistance when you look at the scope of these programs—both in participation and funding.

In fiscal year 1986, for example, the Food Stamp Program alone served over 19 million people at a cost of \$11.5 billion. More than 23 million children participated daily in the National School Lunch Program at a cost of \$3.5 billion.

The Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) reached more than 3 million participants and was funded at \$1.5 billion. And nearly \$1 billion worth of food was distributed to 15 million participants through the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Overall, the federal government

spent 41.5 percent more on food programs in 1986 than it did in 1980.

If I look beyond these substantial numbers, however, I must question how well the programs encourage independence and provide a ladder out of poverty. The food programs are, in fact, part of a larger welfare system that has done little, until very recently, to discourage dependency and offer opportunity.

There are also questions of efficiency. Yes, we've improved the nutritional status of many of the poor. But can we do better? Can we target benefits better? Can we further reduce waste and abuse?

Can we provide assistance to the poor in a more useful form? (Can the homeless use 5-pounds blocks of cheese? Do food stamps better assure good nutrition than cash?) Can we eliminate overlapping benefits, or dif-



During a conference sponsored by FNS' Mid-Atlantic Regional Office (MARO), Administrator Kondratas (left) and MARO Supplemental Food Program Director Pat Dombroski look at an exhibit on WIC.

ferent programs, that serve the same population?

Whatever success we have achieved with our food assistance programs—and it has been significant—there is certainly room for improvement.

**Q . Current welfare reform efforts can be seen as a means for making better use of available resources. How will these efforts affect the food assistance programs?**

**A .** Real welfare reform will not simply be making better use of available resources. Welfare should be viewed in the broader context of the struggle against poverty. Income transfers can alleviate poverty in the short term, but not in the long term unless they are part of programs that enable people to become self-sufficient.

The implications for food assistance programs are twofold. The first is organ-

ization. Many of our nutrition programs have multiple goals. WIC has a strong health component; school lunches serve more than the poor; commodity programs also have an agricultural purpose.

Moreover, the goal of assisting the low-income population overlaps with the programs of other departments—Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, to name just a few.

In the short run then, FNS needs to coordinate its own programs, so that services with a similar purpose and for a similar population, like the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and WIC, do not overlap or leave gaping holes and confusion.

FNS also needs to continue to coordinate with other agencies to simplify the maze of eligibility requirements and regulations facing caseworkers and recipients.

The second implication of welfare reform for food assistance programs is a re-evaluation of purpose. Each of our

programs began with a specific purpose. However, while social problems keep changing, the programs remain rigid.

If, for example, neither food stamps nor 5-pound blocks of cheese (distributed under TEFAP) is the most rational way of providing food assistance to the homeless, then it doesn't make sense to add regulations and money to the Food Stamp Program and TEFAP. We simply end up making those programs more complex and expensive without really addressing the needs of the homeless.

Another example: The American Public Welfare Association, among others, have suggested food stamp cash-out for the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) population. With the proper safeguards, this is a sensible approach to test. Yet there is political resistance to change, partly because of the protective coalitions that have grown around each program.

We must think in creative terms if we want to make significant changes. We should give states more flexibility in developing programs to suit the unique circumstances of their populations.

The Administration's major welfare reform proposal, the Low-Income Opportunity Act of 1987, would provide the framework for just such a creative approach while guaranteeing that there would be no retreat from present gains.

Unfortunately, there is currently little political momentum behind that legislation. The major welfare reform vehicles in the House and Senate, in spite of general agreement on the changed purpose of welfare, would do little more than make incremental changes and increase spending. These bills would have very little effect on the nature and effectiveness of our food assistance programs.

**Q . How will such changes affect the people who receive program benefits?**

**A.** We all know the welfare system is confusingly complex to recipients, caseworkers, and taxpayers. Any attempt to reduce that complexity is welcome, whether it is incremental changes in programs, or computerization that speeds the application process and makes it more accurate, or whatever.

In the short term, the people who receive food assistance program benefits will probably not be significantly affected by the changes. They may receive their benefits in another form—prepared meals or cash or via electronic transfer—but they will continue to receive benefits.

Ultimately, we must empower poor individuals, families, and communities to become independent of welfare. This will not happen overnight, of course. We have to recognize the entrenched nature of our welfare system and how many people have become dependent on it.

As a practical matter, we cannot abolish programs without replacing them with alternatives. But we do need to break down the rigidity of a system where no program can ever be abolished at all, even when it obviously doesn't work. We need to promote ongoing re-evaluation and change.

The major problem with our welfare system has been that it has not provided enough incentive to poor people to control their own lives. In that respect, we've made some progress, because most of the welfare reform proposals being discussed today recognize the importance of giving responsibility to the poor for preparing themselves for productive employment and getting out of poverty.

From Washington State and California to Massachusetts, it is now recognized that the obligations in the welfare system are reciprocal: If society has an obligation to the poor, the poor also have obligations—to themselves, their children, and society.

Government involvement in child care assistance, workfare and work training, child support collection, and other recent efforts recognize the welfare recipient's need for independence and dignity and will promote acceptance of the need for welfare among the

general public.

The danger is that it is easier to talk about these new policies than to implement them. And implementing them piecemeal so that they affect only a small minority of welfare recipients and even fewer of the remaining poor, will simply not go far enough toward solving our social problems.

Decades into the War on Poverty, we still don't have very good answers about how government programs can deal with rural poverty, or prevent unwed motherhood, or keep teenagers in school. The Administration's welfare reform proposal, by allowing states to come up with creative variants to welfare programs, would encourage flexible, community-based responses to the multiple problems of the poor.

**Q. Commodity distribution is one of USDA's earliest food assistance programs. What steps is the Department taking to make the commodity program more desirable to the states as a resource for the school lunch program, nutrition programs for the elderly, and others?**

**A.** I share Secretary Richard Lyng's commitment to improving the USDA commodity program. It is a unique and remarkable program, helping farmers and schoolchildren, the elderly and American Indians, the homeless, people in institutions, and summer campers.

Few realize just how pervasive our commodity assistance is. In fiscal year 1986, USDA donated, through FNS programs, 2.8 billion pounds of food valued at \$2 billion.

The commodity program serves a dual purpose—surplus removal and nutrition assistance. Various aspects of the program are administered by three different USDA agencies, as well as state and local governments, and even business and charitable organizations.

For these reasons, I view my participation in the tri-agency task force established by the Secretary as one of my most important challenges as administrator.

The task force is composed of the heads of the three agencies concerned

with food distribution: the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS). It is chaired by Deputy Secretary Peter Myers.

The very existence of the task force means that USDA has a mechanism in place to ensure a systematic, ongoing review of commodity program activities by senior level staff and policy officials. Quarterly meetings will be conducted to report on issues under review, resolve differences in approach, and present new concerns as they are communicated from state and local provider administrators.

The group has already decided to install a tri-agency computer system. The system should improve communication among the three agencies and allow us to better respond to individual state needs.

The task force has also determined that a number of concerns expressed by commodity program clients result from a misunderstanding of USDA's mission and a lack of information about USDA's activities. To address these problems, the group plans to develop a newsletter and technical guidance materials, and provide technical assistance.

The task force recommendations demonstrate the Department's willingness to promptly address the concerns raised by users of the commodity program. USDA has already begun to meet the challenge of carrying out the recommendations.

We are also working toward improving the nutritional quality of the programs. For example, we are eliminating the addition of sugar and salt wherever we can in the processed items we purchase and using polyunsaturated rather than saturated fat for our precooked, breaded products. In addition, we have reduced the percentage of fat in beef and pork to a level that is healthier and still acceptable to students.

The task force recognizes that improvement at the federal level will make a big difference in program operation—but federal action alone will not solve the problems. The state distributing agencies must do their part as well.

To help them, we have developed standards of practice in such areas as communication, deliveries, costs, quality and packaging of products, and food ordering and allocation.

**Q . You've discussed a number of federal efforts to capitalize on available resources. Since the food assistance programs are operated by state and local government agencies, is USDA also encouraging improvements at those levels?**

**A .** There are many ways in which FNS is encouraging improvements at the state and local levels. An example in the Food Stamp Program is automation to reduce recipient agency errors.

As a result of our encouragement and assistance, almost all states are now using computers to match wage information to detect fraudulent or erroneous information from recipients. Computers are also helping some states process food stamp applications, as well as assist their claims collection activities.

We also have been encouraging communication among the states through our Operation Awareness campaign. We in FNS compile the states' good ideas on improving program management and then publicize these to other states. This year Operation Awareness is focusing on local opportunities for improving Food Stamp Program management.

We have a similar initiative in the WIC program for promoting program excellence. It is called "Focus on Management." As with Operation Awareness, we are recognizing management excellence and helping state agencies share management technologies.

We are promoting management improvements in the Food Distribution Program as well. I have already mentioned the standards of practice we have drafted to help state distributing agents improve their operations.

**Q . In your travels as FNS administrator, you have talked with state and local officials who operate the programs. How do they see their role?**

**A .** It is evident that state and local officials bring a high degree of commitment to their jobs. I have found them eager to have open lines of communication with Washington.

Administering federal programs at the state and local level is no easy task. The number of programs and the mass of regulations they must administer are staggering.

The federal government needs to hold states and localities accountable for the use of federal funds, of course, but it is also vital that state and local officials understand proposed changes in policy and program operation, so that they have a stake in the success of changes.

Intergovernmental relations are too often allowed to degenerate into an "us" versus "them" situation. We are all part of the same system of service delivery—complex as it may be—and we need to work as a team. When differences arise, many can be worked out cooperatively. Even when conflicts are irreconcilable, it helps to understand the other person's perspective.

Quite frankly, explaining and promoting federal policies are not the only reasons I like open communication with state and local people. I find that I learn a lot from them. In fact, some of the best insights and suggestions for changes come from the bottom up. That's the way it should be.

In the area of welfare reform, of course, many states are miles ahead of the federal government. I find that both hopeful and exciting.

**Q . Finally, Ms. Kondratas, what are your priorities during your tenure as FNS Administrator?**

**A .** My highest priority is to keep sight constantly of the goals of FNS programs. It takes a lot of wheels and cogs to keep the machinery of administration running.

Sometimes it is easy to get bogged down in tinkering here and there, to become obsessed with trivia and bureaucratic battles, and to adjust to the frustrating slowness of bureaucratic channels and procedures. It is important for the agency not to lose a sense of purpose.

Second, I want to seek the proper

balance among the various mandates of the agency—in nutrition, agriculture, and welfare—and make sure these are complementary and not competing goals.

I would, of course, like FNS to play an important role in the continuing welfare reform debate and to increase popular support for new approaches to eliminating dependency on welfare—including work programs and new demonstration projects.

There are also a number of priorities in management initiatives. I support the continued computerization of the agency. This is extremely important for a variety of reasons.

We have sustained a 30-percent decrease in personnel over the last 7 years, with essentially no decrease in responsibilities and the addition of several new programs. If we are to maintain accountability and program integrity, we must modernize and upgrade our accounting and financial management systems, as well as program operations.

I would also like to mention that I have found FNS employees to be dedicated, hard-working, and responsive to leadership. I am very grateful for their collective knowledge and institutional memory. The continuity they provide is important for effective management, and their support is absolutely essential to implement change.

Eventually, Congress may enact larger and more significant changes in income-support programs—there are not many who think that the programs in place today are the best that we can do. I am confident FNS will be receptive to changes that offer real hope for improving the overall welfare system.

In the meantime, I think my responsibility is to be a good steward of the programs we have. I hope to make sure that they are managed as efficiently and effectively as possible and that we make them as flexible and responsive to the people they serve as the law allows.

*interview by Debbie Massey  
photos by Larry Rana*

# Making Food Dollars COUNT

**T**True or false: When it comes to food shopping, people with higher incomes tend to get more nutritional value for their dollar than people with less to spend.

False, says Ann Chadwick, director of USDA's Office of the Consumer Advisor.

"Studies have shown that people with limited income tend to get more nutrients, dollar for dollar, than those at higher levels. Just because people have more money to spend does not necessarily mean they make the wisest choices."

All of us need help in acquiring and sharpening skills in selecting nutritious foods within our budgets, Chadwick says. "We are not born with these skills. We have to develop them. But low-income people need the most help in selecting the best nutritional buys because there is less flexibility in their resources."

Providing that extra help has been the goal of a national food buying project, called "Make Your Food Dollars Count," which is now in its fourth year.

A joint effort of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), Human Nutrition Information Service (HNIS), and the Cooperative Extension Service, the Make Your Food Dollars Count (MYFDC) project is helping low-income people learn some guidelines and skills that help them plan ahead, shop smarter, and put economical but nourishing meals on their families' tables.

MYFDC evolved from a prototype project developed by the Northeast regional office of the Food and Nutrition Service.



For a MYFDC workshop in Cleveland, USDA's Ann Chadwick (center) and two area homemakers, Sandy Hinegardner and Marlene Hunter, compare prices at three local stores.

In 1983, seven regional workshops were held in cities throughout the country to draw attention to local nutrition resources and the need to provide food buying information to food stamp participants and others on limited budgets. Each regional workshop generated additional state and local workshops and a variety of nutrition education activities.

## **Project materials widely distributed**

USDA developed a variety of materials for the MYFDC project, and they are still being used widely throughout the country. As George Braley, deputy administrator for special nutrition programs for FNS, explains, some materials were targeted to professionals working with food assistance partici-



pants, but most were targeted to participants themselves.

"Our goal," he says, "has been first to provide health professionals, para-professionals, social service workers, and community leaders with essential program aids, and second to provide something tangible that low-income participants in workshops or one-on-one activities can take home with them as a reminder of what they just learned."

The 1983 booklet called "Making Food Dollars Count—Nutritious Meals at a Low Cost" was the starting point.

The booklet included sample meal plans, with 2 weeks of menus, recipes, and shopping lists for three meals and a snack per day for a family of four persons. The plans were developed by USDA based on cost information, food consumption surveys, and national dietary guidelines.

The sample food plans had been evaluated in a 1982 test in which food stamp households of various backgrounds shopped for and prepared meals as suggested.

### Targeted to needs of participants

In 1984, FNS developed a variety of additional materials for use in teaching food stamp participants. They included:

- **A project guide** with suggestions on conducting workshops and distributing materials.

- **Two full-color posters** in English and Spanish emphasizing the themes "Buy Better" and "Eat Better."

- **Four pamphlets**, in English and Spanish, with single topic messages, such as "Convenience Foods Save Time But Can Cost More" and "Plan Ahead to Make Your Food Dollars Count." The pamphlets, each of which had two messages, included tips on such things as using unit prices and reading food labels to make smart choices, finding the best meat buys, and eating a variety of foods. (These are known as Series I pamphlets.)

- **Newspaper reproducibles** of the pamphlet messages in English and Spanish. These were distributed to

newspaper food editors throughout the country.

- **A 12½-minute slide-tape show** with information from the pamphlets and additional tips on shopping for low-cost, nutritious meals. A narrative guide was included.

New messages for the outside back covers of food stamp coupon booklets were also developed.

In 1985, USDA developed "Thrifty Meals for Two—Making Food Dollars Count" especially for older couples on a limited budget. This 69-page guide on how to shop for and prepare hearty, nutritious, and economical meals included menus and recipes.

In 1986, four more pamphlets were developed and distributed. Three included tips on how to buy, store, and prepare fruits, vegetables, and legumes; recipes were included. The fourth suggested ways to use less sugar, fat, and sodium. All four pamphlets (known as Series II) were in English and Spanish.

The MYFDC publications were developed and printed for free distribution to low-income people taking part in the Food Stamp Program and to Food Stamp Program cooperators. They have also been used by other food program participants, such as people who have received USDA-donated foods



Ann Chadwick (right) and Sandy Hinegardner make their selections using a list prepared in advance as a general guide.



through TEFAP (the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program) and WIC (the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children.)

While free distribution of these educational materials is limited to food assistance participants and program cooperators, the general public may purchase them.

Posters (\$3.50 each) and Series I pamphlets (\$2.00 per set) are available from the Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Series II pamphlets (50 cents per set) are available from the Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, Colorado 81009.

The slide-tape show with narrative guide can be purchased for \$24.50

from USDA's Photo Division, Office of Information, 14th and Independence Avenue, S.W., South Building, Room 4007, Washington, D.C. 20250.

#### **Project continues in many areas**

The Food and Nutrition Service continues to host MYFDC workshops across the country. This past July, for example, FNS' Midwest regional office hosted a workshop in Cleveland.

Prior to the workshop, Midwest regional FNS nutritionist Robert Dean and USDA consumer advisor Ann Chadwick visited three neighborhood stores to compare prices and shop for food using USDA meal plans.

Similar market basket demonstrations have been part of all regional MYFDC workshops. USDA representa-

tives prepare a basic list in advance, then buy a week's groceries, making adjustments as they shop, according to what is available and what are the best buys.

The goal is to buy one week's food using USDA's Thrifty Food Plan suggested cost guideline, which was in July \$62.54 for a family of four.

The market basket is displayed at the MYFDC workshop, along with a list of purchases and prices, and is used to explain how families can shop for well-balanced, nourishing meals on a limited budget.

#### **Helps shoppers realize savings**

"In my opinion, the Make Your Food Dollars Count project fills a real need in helping low-income shoppers become aware of the savings that can be realized by shopping wisely and comparing



FNS Midwest region nutritionist Robert Dean (right) discusses store pricing policies with the store's consumer advisor Norma Wade (left) and assistant store manager Rick Simon.

prices between supermarkets," says Robert Dean.

"For the project, I have shopped in two dozen or so supermarkets in seven Midwest cities since 1983. I have noted differences of \$10 to \$12 dollars on total purchases between stores," he says.

Dean and Chadwick shopped with two low-income Cleveland homemakers at three neighborhood stores prior to the July workshop. Both women were surprised by what they learned.

"I couldn't believe the stores in our area could vary so greatly for one item—20 cents on a package of gelatin," says Sandy Hinegardner, mother of two teenagers.

Marlene Hunter, who heads a family of three children, aged 5, 6, and 9, agrees. "It was a great experience," she says. "By shopping at three stores, I could see how different prices were."

The cost differences were significant. "Items totaled \$58.11 at the first store, which offered good buys, many store brands, and generics. The second store was highest at just over \$67. It did not offer any generic brands and had few size choices," says Dean.

Groceries were \$62.62 at the third store, which donated its market basket for display at the workshop. The foods in the basket were later given to the shoppers who participated in the cost survey.

Norma Wade, consumer advisor for the third store, believes careful shopping can make a difference. "We have to use menus and shopping lists as a guide and take advantage of sales and seasonal items," she says.

"If I were shopping or instructing someone else in shopping, I would advise, for example, buying an on-sale rump roast, which has little fat and no bone, instead of a regularly priced chuck roast which has bone. It would be a better buy."

Wade cautions shoppers to avoid waste. "Avoiding waste means using everything you buy," she says. Purchasing larger quantities and freezing leftovers can be a good way to save.

Wade also cautions to be careful not to include nonfood items such as soaps and cleaning and paper products when calculating food dollars.

As more and more convenience

foods become available, it's helpful for shoppers to consider extra costs that can be involved in having someone else do the work.

"It's especially important that the MYFDC project be made available to young homemakers who lack experience in shopping wisely and do not realize the real cost of T.V.-type dinners, many prepared foods, and soft drinks," says Dean.

### **Reaching people who need help**

The success of the MYFDC project depends on finding ways to get educational materials developed by USDA to people who can use them at the state and local levels.

At the Cleveland workshop, representatives of several state and local agencies—such as the Cuyahoga County area WIC program, the area agency on aging, the food stamp agency, Head Start, the Community Volunteers Action Center, and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) formed an information-sharing network.

During the conference, a number of people reported on techniques they're using to help low-income people stretch their food dollars.

Through EFNEP, for example, nutrition aides have been teaching basic nutrition and shopping skills to low-income families in their homes in the Cleveland area for more than 18 years.

Last year, in Cuyahoga County, EFNEP tried a new approach to reach groups of eight or more homemakers in community settings and offered the same basic type of information taught by a home economist.

"All homemakers who complete the course receive a certificate of recognition from Ohio State University," says Cuyahoga County Cooperative Extension dietitian Bonnie Chirayath. "This is strong motivation. The program has been evaluated and proven to actually change people's food habits. People select better diets after the education."

Chirayath says the MYFDC campaign has been a boost to cooperative education efforts in Cleveland.

### **Materials used in variety of ways**

The MYFDC materials are used in a variety of ways and in various settings.

In Illinois, EFNEP coordinator Soneeta Grogan says her office not only uses MYFDC brochures in the eight area EFNEP offices, but distributes the materials to all county Extension offices. "Extension home economists have a great demand for these brochures," she says.

Because of Illinois' large Hispanic population, especially in the Chicago area, Grogan worked with the University of Illinois several years ago to develop a Spanish translation of the MYFDC slide show script.

In Champaign County, Illinois, EFNEP advisor Karen Gehrt used MYFDC materials in a MYFDC homemaker contest. "We wanted to demonstrate that the Thrifty Food Plan works," she says.

Gehrt obtained the support of several local grocery stores, and recruited about 30 homemakers. "We had to find homemakers who were willing to keep records of grocery receipts and planned menus," she says. "The homemakers also had to agree to a monthly consultation with an EFNEP paraprofessional nutrition advisor."

"We publicized the kick-off of the contest," Gehrt says, "as well as the announcement of first, second, and third place winners who achieved the lowest average monthly budgets and the best planned menus. The participating grocery stores then awarded prizes of groceries to the winners."

### **Also helping with other programs**

Warren Boyd, policy consultant with the Indiana Department of Public Welfare, coordinates distribution of MYFDC materials to all 92 Indiana county welfare offices.

"The materials are really useful," he says. "They're short enough—not too wordy—so that people who are not highly educated are able to read and understand them," says Boyd.

"Usually, in a public assistance program, the emphasis is on getting the participant benefits—such as AFDC or food stamps—but MYFDC goes beyond that. It shows the participant and the public a different side of the public assistance story. Beyond providing just benefits, we're also providing a useful service."

Illinois WIC nutritionist Gloria Singer says MYFDC information materials are



an important part of nutrition efforts in the WIC program.

"WIC nutritionists are adapting the recipes and using ideas from the MYFDC project guide in their nutrition education classes," she says.

Also, during the past year, WIC nutritionists have been previewing MYFDC slides and audio-tapes. "Four sets of MYFDC slides and tapes are being rotated throughout the state," Singer says.

The brochures are especially helpful, she adds. "They are pertinent, attractive, and easy to read."

A 1986 nutrition education survey of Illinois WIC participants showed that the majority of respondents felt learning about nutrition was very important.

The most interesting topic to participants was "how to save money on food," and the preferred way of learning was through pamphlets, audio-visuals, and food demonstrations.

#### **Local efforts are very important**

Getting feedback from participants is an important part of any educational effort. The role of local agencies in this, as in every part of the MYFDC project, has been crucial.

"USDA recognizes that the efforts of local agencies who carry out the initiatives set forth by the Make Your Food Dollars Count project are the most important," says consumer advisor Chadwick. "Community workers know and understand the needs."

The need for providing food buying information is clear to nutrition educators like Extension dietitian Bonnie Chirayath.

"We all agree low-income families are helped by the extra food dollars they get from the Food Stamp Program," she says. "But we also believe that if this help is accompanied with education, people make better and more healthful choices for their families."

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*article and photos  
by Mary Jane Getlinger*

# WIC

## A Look At An Award-Winning Program

**I**n a management improvement effort known as "Focus on Management," federal, state, and local WIC managers are looking at ways to achieve several key goals.

One is targeting WIC benefits to high-risk mothers and children, who are most in need of WIC services. Another is integrating WIC with other health services and combining appropriate records to make following participants' progress easier and more effective.

Still other goals are better managing administrative costs and improving vendor management by making sure food stores authorized to accept WIC vouchers are carefully selected, trained, and monitored.

For 13 years, WIC—officially known as the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children—has been providing food and nutrition education to low-income mothers and children whose health may be jeopardized because of inadequate diet.

Through Focus on Management WIC managers are taking a closer look at what works best at the state and local levels and sharing information on successful approaches.

The following article looks at Pennsylvania's WIC vendor management program, for which the state has received national recognition.



Special training helps vendors understand how WIC works. Here, Vanessa Mosee, vendor manager for Philadelphia WIC

agency North, Inc., shows a group of vendors what information is included on WIC participants' identification cards.



## Pennsylvania Is A Leader In WIC Vendor Management

**F**ood retailers play a vital role in making WIC work. By stocking the appropriate WIC foods and exchanging them for participants' vouchers, they help make sure mothers and children get the food they need for good health.

The majority of food stores are eager to follow program rules. But those who overcharge for WIC foods, exchange vouchers for cash, or sell unapproved or nonfood items, tap program resources.

In Pennsylvania, a relatively new vendor management system is ensuring that WIC food dollars benefit only participants. Limiting the number of stores authorized to accept WIC vouchers is an important part of the new system.

### Authorized stores carefully selected

"We felt that giving food stores open access to the program, which means no standards of performance or desired qualifications, did not result in the best service to participants or the most effective use of food dollars," says Mike Schappell, retail store coordinator for the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

"In the past, Pennsylvania did not have a strong vendor program, but since we began limiting vendors 2 years ago, we've eliminated a lot of problems."

To put the new system into effect, Pennsylvania officials estimated the number of vendors needed to provide adequate service to the approximately 150,000 participants the state serves monthly. Geographic features and participation totals were used to arrive at a ratio of one vendor for every 75 participants.

Sixty-five of 181 vendors who applied last year were not authorized either because the number of vendors in their service area exceeded the state's new participant-vendor ratio or

because they did not meet standards for participation.

During the past few years, Pennsylvania has reduced the number of vendors by 24 percent, without causing any undue hardship to participants.

"Using limitation criteria has allowed the state agency to better control the vendor population," says Pat Dombroski, regional WIC director for the Mid-Atlantic regional office of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the federal agency that administers the program nationally. "Pennsylvania tailors the vendor population to program and participant needs."

In addition to federal approval, the state has also won support for its criteria system from vendors and the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association. In fact, the retailer group assisted in developing the policies.

### Performance and prices are factors

With experience, Pennsylvania WIC managers have modified and refined the limitation criteria to accurately identify fluctuations in the number of vendors needed. They've also identi-

# PENNSY

fied vendor characteristics that correlate with business integrity, exceptional service, and low probability of abuse.

A store must have fair prices, a variety of food items, and, when applicable, a good past performance as a WIC vendor to be selected or to remain in the program.

"Selection criteria insure that a store has competitive food prices, is sanitary, properly stores food, and meets minimum requirements for inventory and operating hours," says Schappell.

Considerable research goes into evaluating competitive prices. Pennsylvania collects prices from all vendor applicants at the same time and compares vendors' price to one another.

Price comparison has contributed significantly in reducing the cost of WIC foods. In Pennsylvania, the average monthly cost of WIC foods is \$26.40 per participant, \$5.43 below the national average.

State managers have found chain store prices for WIC foods to be the lowest and operators the least likely to abuse the program. Sixty-two percent of the 1,700 WIC vendors in Pennsylvania are chain stores.

## **Monitoring is also important**

Each state's WIC program is required to monitor a certain percentage of its food vendors to be sure they are not abusing the program. Pennsylvania's new system makes monitoring and sanctioning more effective in several ways.

"Because Pennsylvania has a manageable number of vendors, it monitors them at an acceptable rate and covers monitoring costs," says FNS' Dombroski. "This enables the state to more actively pursue sanctioning those

vendors who do abuse the program."

A vendor can be disqualified from the WIC program for from 1 to 3 years depending on the nature and extent of abuse. A civil money penalty also may be assessed.

"Pennsylvania was the second state in the nation to establish a civil money penalty policy for sanctioning abusive vendors," says Dombroski.

In deciding whether to disqualify a vendor, state officials consider whether the vendor is needed to meet participants' needs in a particular area. If so, they may impose a civil money penalty in lieu of disqualifying the vendor from the program.

Vendors who are sanctioned have the option to appeal through a fair hearing. Pennsylvania won 93 percent of the appeals made last year, showing that the monitoring system is successful in identifying grocers who should be sanctioned.

An added bonus is that the system saves money. Since it's less costly to monitor a set number of carefully selected vendors, Pennsylvania has been able to channel operating funds to other administrative areas.

## **Training helps prevent abuses**

While monitoring and sanctioning are useful tools, state managers feel the best way to protect program dollars is to prevent abuses before they occur. To do this, they provide ongoing training to all WIC vendors, who are required by their contracts to attend training on program regulations.

"Since 1986, all approved WIC vendors have been required to attend one training session each fiscal year in order to maintain their authorization," says Schappell.



During vendor training sessions at North, Inc., Vanessa Mosee (left) and assistant Linda Stokes (page 15) use a variety of materials, including a display of foods that can be purchased with WIC vouchers.

# PENNSYLVANIA



"We've developed special training aids, such as a videotape, to show vendors exactly what foods are allowed and how to process and redeem food vouchers."

The materials also explain what instructions local WIC staff give participants to help them understand how to use WIC vouchers.

During the training, local agency instructors emphasize the nutritional aspect of WIC. They explain that participants receive specific foods, such as milk, juice, eggs, cereal, cheese, peanut butter, and infant formula, for health reasons and that nutrition education is also provided.

"Vendors don't always understand the importance of not allowing participants to buy non-WIC food items," says Schappell. "We tell them we are spending millions of dollars in federal and state funds in their grocery stores and to consider this an investment in

children's health."

Vendors are asked for their comments after completing the training. "The overall response from the vendors has been positive," says Schappell. "They have said the training sessions are long overdue."

## **Innovations make state a leader**

Pennsylvania has received national recognition as a leader in vendor management.

During the fourth annual conference of the national WIC directors last March, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture John W. Bode presented awards to six WIC agencies that exhibited excellence in managing the program.

Pennsylvania was honored that day for "setting clear standards for selecting WIC program food vendors and monitoring their performance, thereby

achieving better service to participants at a lower cost."

Working more closely with vendors has made a big difference. "We have had more success with vendors in the past 1 to 2 years because we've been more visible to them," says Mike Schappell. "We require more of them, and we make sure they understand the program."

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*article and photos  
by Marian Wig*

# USDA Food Helps Schools Serve First-Rate Meals

One of the most valuable resources available to school food service directors is food donated by USDA. Commodity foods make up about a quarter of all food served in school lunches, and that adds up to big savings for schools interested in keeping meal prices low.

But do schools compromise quality by using USDA-donated food? Not at all, says Cheryl Uchida, associate director of nutrition services for Portland Public Schools.

Like many food service managers across the country, Uchida has been making changes in her lunch program in recent years to bring meals more in line with current dietary guidelines. She's serving a greater variety of foods; including less salt, sugar, and fat; and increasing the amount of fiber and starches in meals.

Uchida uses USDA commodities extensively in her program and says donated foods help her in many ways.

## Changes in preparing and serving meals

Uchida supervises the district's central kitchen, which prepares meals for 82 elementary and secondary schools. "With a central kitchen system, it's easier to make sure that meals throughout the district meet the dietary guidelines," she says. "Since we plan the menus, do the buying, and prepare most of the food, we can make most of the changes we want right here.

"One of the easiest changes we've made is increasing the fiber in our breads, rolls, and other baked goods," she explains. "We're using more and a greater variety of the whole grains like whole wheat, rolled wheat, rolled oats, and bulgur in our baked products."

Food service workers at schools help out by cutting down on the butter put on rolls and other breads when they're served.

"We asked the school cafeteria staff to abandon the paint-brush method of buttering the rolls, for example. Some now leave it to students to take butter if they want it, some drizzle a small amount of butter onto the rolls, and others coat the bread with an egg wash instead of butter."

The district is using more mozzarella cheese than ever before because of the lower fat content. Wherever possible, in nacho cheese sauces and pizza toppings, for instance, the district substitutes mozzarella for some of the processed or cheddar cheeses.

USDA-donated beef is already low in fat. However, to make lunches as lean as possible, Uchida's staff cook commodity beef in large kettles and remove the fat before the beef is used in recipes. Contractors supplying prepared items to Portland schools do the same with the USDA-donated beef they process into meatballs, patties, burritos, steaks, and meat toppings.

## Salad dressings are also low-fat

There are low-fat dressings too. For some time, Portland staff have been making their own ranch-style salad dressing using commodity non-fat dry milk.

Uchida stresses the effort the district is making to include local school staff in planning and training for school lunch changes. "You have to have their ideas, their understanding, and their support," she says.

Many changes made in the central kitchen rely on follow-through at the serving sites. While the central kitchen staff are developing lower sodium recipes, for example, school cafeteria workers have stopped adding salt before they serve the food and are making salt shakers less available to students.

Variety is important and here, too,

commodities donated by USDA are helpful. "Not only do we get a wide selection of low- or no-cost nutritious foods," she says, "but using commodities as much as possible allows us to save money we can spend on a variety of other foods not available from USDA."

## "High performance" meals new this year

This year, in addition to the regular school lunch, all the high schools in Portland are adding a new meal concept—the "high performance" meal. Called the "Training Table," the meals are high in carbohydrates and fiber, low in fat and sugar, and have moderate amounts of protein.

Kristy Obbink is assistant director of nutrition services for Portland and oversees the lunch and breakfast programs in the high schools. She helped establish the Training Table on a trial basis last year.

The meals were originally intended as meals for athletes in training, but soon became popular with all students. According to Obbink, "The nutritionally balanced meals are designed to promote optimum health, not only for athletes, but for anyone interested in healthy food."

Because the meals are based around a starch entree—rice, wheat, potatoes, or beans—USDA-supplied commodities are usually the major ingredients. A typical Training Table entree is a folded pizza, called a calzone, made with commodity flour, ground beef, tomato paste, and mozzarella cheese.

Another favorite is a commodity potato, topped with chili made from commodity beans and tortilla pieces. There's also chicken and vegetable stir-fry over steamed rice; a bean and cheese burrito with lettuce, tomato, salsa, onion, and yogurt topping, and

rice; submarine sandwiches with turkey and mozzarella; beef and vegetable stir-fry over noodles, and others.

Also available on the Training Table are things like whole wheat bread, steamed vegetables, and fresh fruit.

### **Better products widely available**

Changes showing up in school cafeterias are matched by changes at the state and national levels. Al Curry, a California commodity processing consultant, says better processed products are available to schools today for a number of reasons.

For one thing, USDA is making available more nutritious products, and processors are responding to increasing requests for more nutritious end products.

Among California's more than 150 processing agreements, pizza is one of the most popular end products. Curry cites it as a good example of how products are changing to reflect current preferences.

"You're ahead to begin with," he says, "because the commodity beef that goes into the pizza has less fat than most similar commercial products and USDA cheeses are 100-percent natural."

He says processors are making a concerted effort to reduce the amount of salt in products, and the use of monosodium glutamate is disappearing all together.

There's no oil in the pizza sauce, and oil used elsewhere in cooking is polyunsaturated.

"Most of the pizzas processed for California schools have a 50/50 blend of mozzarella and cheddar cheeses because this provides less fat and adds another taste."

Processed products are coming into wider use as manufacturers develop end products more in line with the die-

tary guidelines. Food service managers are finding that although they may not always be able to order food tailor-made to their specifications, they are able to choose from a growing list of processed products that meet their needs and nutritional standards.

### **USDA has made many improvements**

USDA commodities already meet or exceed the specifications for commercial food items, and today both the variety and nutritional value of commodities are improving.

The salt and fat levels in USDA commodity meats have been lower than most commercial products for some time. Canned tuna packed in water is available. Fish and chicken nuggets are fried in vegetable oil.

Specifications for canned fruits require light syrup or juice for packing. USDA is continuing to buy fresh fruits

and vegetables when they're available and when quick distribution to schools can be arranged.

The past few years have been the most dynamic in the history of the commodity program. There will continue to be changes in the program as food service people nationwide look for new ways to use the resources they have to bring their meal programs in line with the dietary guidelines.

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*article by Tino Serrano*



# JERSEY FRESH

## In The Garden State

**T**he license plates boast "The Garden State." Schoolchildren will tell you the same. Yet you ride down the New Jersey Turnpike, 12 lanes wide. Industry surrounds you. You wonder where the gardens are.

But they are there. In fact, 60 percent of New Jersey is open spaces—parks, forests, and farms. One-fifth of the entire state is farmland.

"New Jersey is an agricultural state," says Mary Anne McGovern of New Jersey's Department of Agriculture. "We are in the top five states in production of peaches, blueberries, peppers, and eggplant."

McGovern coordinates a 4-year-old statewide campaign known as "Jersey Fresh ... from the Garden State." The campaign is successfully making consumers of all ages more aware of their state's rich agricultural resources.

In New Jersey schools, the Jersey Fresh campaign and other initiatives are teaching students the advantages of eating fresh, local products and helping them understand more about the food they eat.

### Several groups are involved

School food service and state people have worked together on the Jersey Fresh campaign. As Joan Strokis, North Brunswick food service director and past president of the New Jersey School Food Service Association, explains, both groups came up with the idea about the same time.

"While I was attending regional and national school food service conventions with colleagues from other parts of the country, I learned that many of them were working more closely with their departments of education and agriculture. I brought these ideas back and we decided we wanted to work with the department of agriculture to promote New Jersey produce.

"At the same time," Strokis continues, "we learned that the state was

starting its own public relations campaign to promote Jersey produce. It was quite a coincidence. We met with the state secretary of agriculture, who helped get the department of education interested."

Together, they decided to promote a campaign in September, since that is the best month during the school year for fresh produce.

"Now every year we celebrate 'Jersey Fresh in School Lunch,'" says Strokis, who heads the Jersey Fresh committee for the New Jersey School Food Service Association.

### Special events carry out theme

New Jersey schools and state agencies have come up with a variety of ways to celebrate the special month. Schools have had logo and poster contests, passed out promotional packets, and coloring books.

The state department of agriculture produced a colorful poster that hangs on cafeteria walls promoting "Jersey Fresh and School Lunch ... Good Taste is Always in Style." The poster is a photograph of five healthy-looking children with Jersey's own apples, blueberries, corn, peaches, tomatoes, and a carton of milk.

Students are getting the message. "I've found that more youngsters are picking up salads, looking for items that are fresh," says Strokis. "When schools can offer choices, I find more students are choosing salads; fewer are choosing snack items.

"It's not just a dieting trend," Strokis adds. "In meetings with student groups we find they are much more aware of what they are eating. And it's not just girls who are making new choices. Many more young men are also choosing lighter food."

Although North Brunswick schools added a hamburger and french fries line 3 years ago, Strokis says participation in the high school's salad and

hot lunch line are now growing and fewer students are choosing fast food type items.

"Maybe the balance is swinging back the other way," she says. "Everything students are hearing and reading about healthy diets is having an impact on them. Students are getting nutrition information from many sources."

One of the obvious sources is their schools and the emphasis their teachers and cafeteria managers place on good nutrition.

### From the farm to the lunchroom

Especially during September, Jersey Fresh Month, most food service directors try to use as much local produce as they can. Some make displays of local produce, to encourage the students' recognition of what their state has to offer.

Last year, Diane Jackson, school food service director of Pittman Schools in Gloucester County, took her display of corn stalks, fresh fruits and vegetables, and the department of agriculture poster to various schools to support the Jersey Fresh campaign.

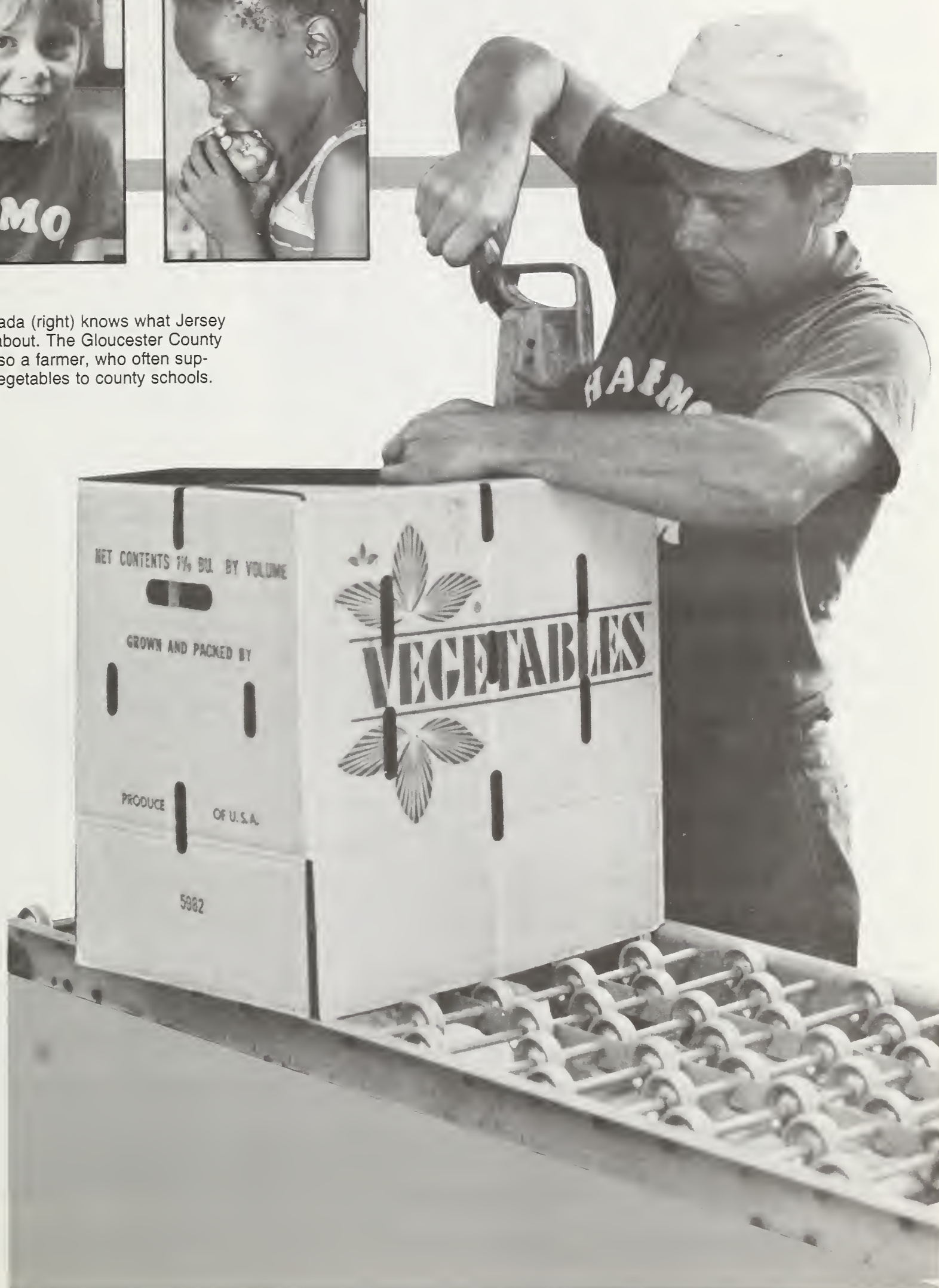
Some food service directors feature names of New Jersey localities on their menus for the month. During September, Susan Downam, food service director of Upper Township School District in Cape May County, advertises what items on her menu are Jersey fresh and the area in the state where they are grown.

Some school food service directors—especially in smaller, more rural areas of south Jersey—make special trips to buy what fresh produce they can. The Jersey growing season is from mid-May through the fall.

Susan Downam buys whatever fresh fruits and vegetables she can find at local markets for her two schools—an elementary and a middle school. "We have tomatoes, radishes, cucumbers, watermelons, and cantaloupes," she



Roman Szelada (right) knows what Jersey Fresh is all about. The Gloucester County teacher is also a farmer, who often supplies fresh vegetables to county schools.



says. "I've gone to local farms to get peaches. I'll be using local strawberries at a sports banquet next week."

### **Some "buy fresh" all year long**

Suzanne Horn, school food service director for Gloucester Township Schools in Gloucester County is lucky enough to do all of her produce buying through a local market—a traditional fruit stand—all year 'round.

"I put Jersey tomatoes on the menu, broccoli, even corn on the cob. In September and October, I specify that I want Jersey produce. That's when it's available," she says.

Food service director Jackson gets apples from a farmer in the next town most of the year. "He sells them to me for \$4.00 per basket," she says. "It saves me money, and it's nice to know I am buying locally." In September, Jackson will pile her car up with local watermelon, cantaloupe, and other fresh produce.

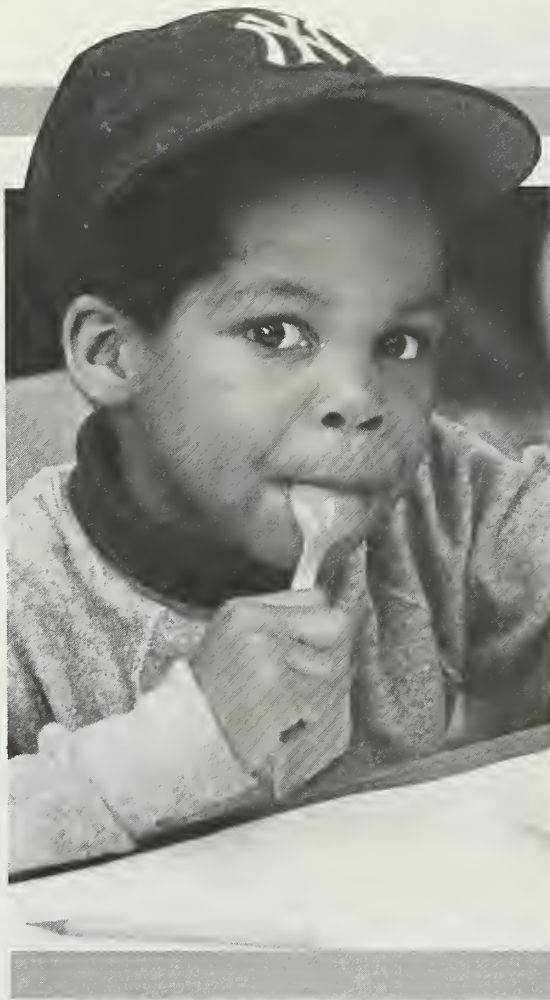
Jackson also buys produce from a special source—Roman Szelada, a teacher in the Pittman Middle School who is also a farmer. "He brings me crates of strawberries, tomatoes, and peppers, mostly in September. I pay him a little below market price, and everyone benefits," Jackson says.

Isabelle Wagner uses fresh vegetables from New Jersey at her salad bar, at Kingsway Regional High School. "When farmers have the produce, I use as much as I can get," she says.

"I have a stand that I patronize. It's on my way to work. The owner will call me up and tell me the produce she thinks I might want. I use mostly tomatoes, but also broccoli, asparagus, apples, watermelon, and cantaloupe."

Wagner tries to make the most of her food service operation, instituting new ideas in producing and preparing meals. "Our high school students have only 22 minutes for lunch," she says. "When I first started here, the bell would ring and youngsters would still be standing in line, waiting for lunch. Attendance was very low."

To build participation, Wagner instituted a bag lunch bar. Students get a choice of five or six sandwiches, a choice of four fruits, a bag of potato chips, and milk. "With the bag lunch and salad bars, participation has really picked up," Wagner says.



### **Special workshops teach new ideas**

Wagner demonstrated her creative use of USDA commodities this past June, when the New Jersey Department of Education sponsored its third annual "Jersey Fresh" workshop. The workshops promote innovation in the lunchroom kitchen and encourage school food service directors to adapt recipes for their districts.

The workshops are held in the kitchen-laboratory of Middlesex County College. They feature presenters who demonstrate actual techniques in preparing popular items that incorporate USDA commodities and Jersey fresh produce in school lunch menus.

At this year's conference, for example, Wagner used commodity cheese to make a sauce that can be used in cream of broccoli or cauliflower soup, as a cream sauce for vegetables, and as a dip for potatoes.

She also baked a spice cake with USDA sweet potatoes, an apricot-pineapple pie with USDA apricots and pineapple, and crumb cakes made with USDA cherries and blueberries.

### **Other initiatives are also helpful**

In addition to the Jersey Fresh campaign and workshops, state agencies

and individual schools have initiated other ways to encourage imaginative use of commodities in school lunches and make students more aware of nutrition.

For example, the state department of agriculture is currently producing a second poster to be sent to all school districts along with a letter to food service directors and administrators promoting the use of commodities.

A number of state agencies and the school food service association recently joined in a campaign to increase students' awareness of the "Dietary Guidelines for Americans," jointly published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The guidelines advise Americans to: eat a variety of foods; maintain desirable weight; avoid too much fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol; eat foods with adequate starch and fiber; and avoid too much sugar and sodium.

A variety of activities helped capture students' interest. For instance, after learning about the guidelines, fourth through seventh grade students submitted slogans with nutritional information to a statewide contest. The 12 winning slogans, of 4,426 entries, became the "fortunes" in fortune cookies that schools throughout the state served during March, National Nutrition Month.

Statewide efforts like these, combined with activities in individual schools, are reinforcing the good health message that's central to the Jersey Fresh campaign.

School food service directors are noticing the results. "I see children getting more sophisticated in their eating habits," says Gloucester County's Diane Jackson.

"I can serve vegetables today that I wouldn't dream the students would eat just a few years ago."

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*article and photos  
by Linda Feldman*

# Shooting For The Top

**N**orth Carolina has a strong commitment to excellence in public education, and that commitment extends to school food service.

This year the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has developed a new recognition system for school food service, called the Awards for Excellence Program, that supports this commitment to quality.

The new system helps measure how well programs and resources are being managed.

## Sets new standards for food service

A 1986 summer conference to set agency goals identified the need to re-



Inez Woodall (left), food service manager at Benson Elementary in Johnston City, was one of last year's award winners in the state's Awards for Excellence program. She is pictured here with county food service director Mary Long Beasley.



vise the state's obsolete awards program for school food programs.

"So much has changed in child nutrition in the past 10 years, we felt we had to restructure our awards program to make it more meaningful," says George McCullen, state child nutrition regional coordinator. McCullen chaired a committee of five state school food service employees who were assigned to change the awards system.

"Since the state was in the process of rewriting goals and setting standards for excellence in public education, we wanted to relate our awards system to the highest level of achievement," he adds.

"We surveyed other states to see what kind of incentive systems were out there. Ideas from other states were helpful in our planning. Most states we surveyed were very interested in receiving our final awards package."

### Criteria developed for several areas

Standards for excellence were developed to assist school food service managers attain maximum effectiveness in several critical program areas, including financial management, food production and service, sanitation and safety, labor, promotion and merchandising, participation, nutrition education, and personnel management.

Committee members developed the criteria and documentation needed in each area. To let school food service directors know exactly what was expected to meet the criteria, they identified specific goals and the number of points schools would earn by accomplishing them.

Since McCullen had experience as an auditor, he was responsible for the sections involving labor, financial management, and personnel. Others on the committee drew on their expertise in areas such as food production and sanitation to develop measurable standards.

Julie Stewart, assistant director of child nutrition for the state, wrote the

nutrition section since she had experience as a dietitian.

"Schools are now doing much more nutrition education than in the past," Stewart says. "We wanted to reward those staffs that routinely present nutrition information to students and participate in nutrition training."

### New system was ready by fall

Current and retired child nutrition staff and several local food service directors helped evaluate the proposed system and made suggestions. After a busy summer of work by the awards committee, the final product was presented to all school superintendents and child nutrition directors.

To explain the new system and answer any questions, the state staff held special training sessions. They asked for schools to send documentation on their programs by April so awards could be sent back for presentation at ceremonies by the end of the school year.

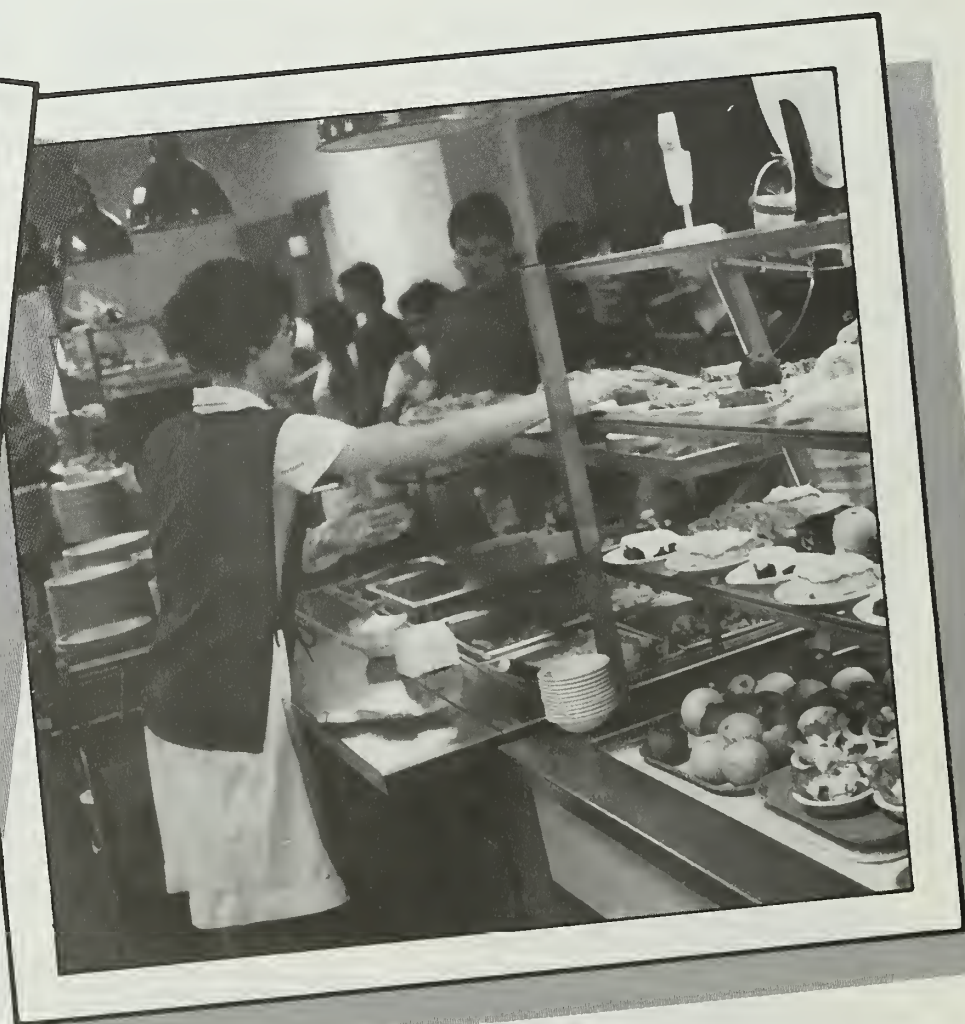
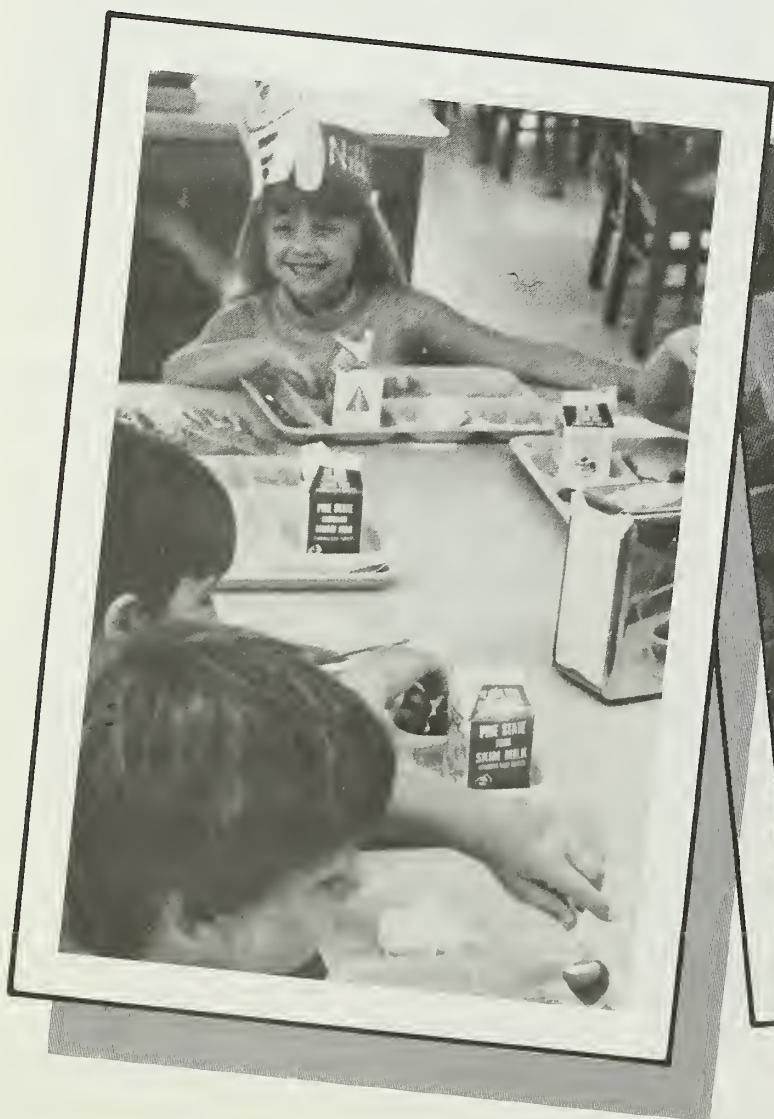
Only two schools received a plaque this year, the highest award offered. Other winners received framed blue, red, or white ribbon certificates, depending on the number of points earned.

As McCullen explains, some school staff think the standards may be too high, but he feels they are appropriately challenging. "We are trying to recognize true excellence, not just give out awards," he says.

### Top performers are recognized

To receive full credit under the new criteria, cafeterias must maintain a sanitation grade of 98—high for a food service establishment. Other standards require that labor costs don't exceed 35 percent of total revenues and that at least 90 percent of elementary students participate in the lunch program.

Points are also awarded if the school is involved in other child nutrition programs, such as the Summer Food Service Program and the Child Care Food Program.



Cheerful lunchrooms and good food help make school meals popular at Benson Elementary (left) and at Nash Junior

Under the promotion and merchandising standards, the school must utilize a variety of merchandising techniques, such as using garnishes found in the School Recipe Portfolio, a full-color recipe book produced by several Southeast states and USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

Schools are also recognized for providing a pleasant, attractive dining environment with points awarded for colorful walls, plants, seasonal decorations, student artwork, and a screened dish-return area.

In order to receive full credit for promotion and merchandising, students and parents must have the opportunity to provide input into the school lunch program. Students and parents can get involved in activities such as menu planning, taste testing, nutrition education, and cafeteria improvements.

John Murphy, North Carolina state child nutrition director, praises local school food service staff for what they are accomplishing in this area, often with limited funds.

"You have so many creative people who do fantastic jobs in merchandising their programs. They do wonders with limited resources in decorating cafeterias and developing costumes for cafeteria staff," he says.

One of the year's top winners made wooden decorations at home to brighten up lunchroom tables. "How you present the food service staff and the cafeteria is important in merchandising the school lunch program," Murphy says.

#### **Training efforts also given credit**

Training is another area state managers feel is important, and the new awards system gives credit to schools that make this a priority.

"We encourage food service staff to take advantage of available opportunities, such as our summer food managers workshops and our videotape training series on efficient quantity food production," says John Murphy.

There are a variety of training options, such as technical food service courses offered through local community colleges. Topics range from equipment use and procurement, to cost control, and quantity food preparation. Food service staff can also take advantage of hands-on training at the state test kitchen in Raleigh. All of this training is counted in the awards point system.

Murphy feels the new awards system is an important way to encourage and reward outstanding work.

"We can't always increase salaries or benefits," he says, "but through programs like this, we can appreciate and recognize what local school lunch directors contribute each day."

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*article and photos  
by Kent Taylor*



High in Nash County (above and right). Both schools received awards for their innovative food service programs.

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